



Machu Picchu: The Heights of Nature

Orchids, hummingbirds and verdant jungle flourish on the outskirts of the Lost City of the Incas.

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A Quechua legend tells the story of a young Incan princess who was destined to marry the Sun God but fell in love with a victorious warrior. Upon learning of their romance, the princess' father, the Inca king, banished the warrior to the battlefields of the Amazonian mountains, knowing the assignment would result in his certain death. Sobbing inconsolably, the princess chased her beloved into the forest. Wherever one of her tears fell, a bright magenta *Waqianki* orchid (*Masdevallia veitchiana*) sprouted, leaving a trail for her warrior to follow, while he mourned their lost love.



This is the story that Carmen Soto, the resident biologist of *Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel*, tells me while we walk on the hotel's orchid trail. "The *Waqianki* is considered the symbolic flower of Machu Picchu," she says, quickly adding that no photographer has been able to capture its true fiery reds. The hotel's grounds are

home to the world's largest private orchid collection: 372 species growing in their natural habitat. Set in the cloud forests of Peru, the area is abundant with quinine, tree ferns, tropical walnut and alder trees, Incan buddlejas and bromeliads, all laid out in thick layers over the steep mountainsides. Most orchids live attached to tree bark, absorbing nutrients through their porous roots. And although there are no tragic stories of forbidden love in these ecosystems, there certainly are rules of attraction among the insects, birds, modified petals, pistils and stamens.

The *Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel* sits at 6,627 feet in the village of Aguas Calientes, a 20-minute winding drive down from the lost citadel of Machu Picchu. The hotel's grounds were formerly a tea and coffee plantation, until Inkaterra purchased the land in 1991. Today, the Inkaterra Association, ITA, is a non-governmental organization



dedicated to preserving the culture and biodiversity in the region. Now, ITA is re-introducing *Yanay Argos* trees (*Nectandra furcata*), which produce the favorite fruit of Peru's national bird, the Andean cock-of-the-rock (*tunqui*, in Quechua). *Tunquis* seem like orchids that once dreamed of flying and were rewarded by becoming bright red-coral birds in the highest and lushest forests of the world. During mating season, the *tunqui* flies in symmetrical patterns to seduce

the female—the more symmetrical the dance, the more attractive the suitor.

Across from the orchid trail, there is a small patch of tea shrubs (*Camellia sinensis*) left over from the property's tea-producing days. Organic tea from this small plantation is served as a refreshment to welcome hotel guests. Next to the tea shrubs, there is a shed where three men knead tea leaves on enormous, granite boulders. As the leaves release their natural juices, they react to the natural acidity of the men's palms, triggering the oxidation process. The leaves are then placed in a large clay amphora and left to ferment for two to four hours to produce green tea or eight to twelve hours for black tea. The hotel also has entered into partnerships with local producers of organic cocoa and coffee, and at times with hotel employees who are producers themselves.



After a very botanical morning, I go to the center of town to take the bus to Machu Picchu. On my way there, I recognize some of the trees I saw with Carmen and plenty of pink bamboo orchids (*Sobralia macrantha*), poking their large blooms among the wide leaves. The Inca citadel was founded around 1438 to

house priests, astronomers and students, but was never finished. Machu Picchu was only inhabited for 100 years, until the entire population abandoned the city, possibly to escape a plague of yellow fever. Hiram Bingham, an American explorer, rediscovered Machu Picchu in 1912. He loaned the gold excavated from the citadel to Yale, where it remained ever since. This past September, Yale finally agreed to return the treasures to Peru.

Today, llamas roam free among the abandoned grassy terraces and perfectly cut stone temples set at the top of a colossal hill. A tableau of tourists in the distance makes the bright green squares and stone walls even more awesome. The finest of all the constructions is the Temple of the Sun, a rounded tower with several windows that encircles a natural rock formation at the edge of a cliff. Each June 21, the sun passes through one of the tower's windows and is perfectly bisected by the sharp edge of the sacred rock. Incas were magnificent architects who seamlessly integrated their stone cities into the forest and the mammoth granite mountains.

In this sense, *Inkaterra* does the same on a much smaller scale. The heliconia and orchid gardens surrounding the cottages are manicured versions of the forest climbing up the surrounding peaks. The gardeners are not only trained to care for known plants, but also to discover new ones. In 2000, some of the hotel gardeners discovered a new species of orchid (*Kefersteinia koechlinorum*), with tiny flowers resembling candy canes. And since most of the species living in cloud forests are believed to be undiscovered, there is plenty of room for exploration.



As the afternoon sets in, I lounge by the pool watching the hummingbirds meet around the hanging feeders. I stay until the evening, when I move into the sauna hut. The hut is round, about six feet high and thatched with *ichu* grass from the *puna* (the High Andean plateau). The Incas used this same type of grass to make their roofs. Inside, the hut is lined with eucalyptus branches that release their scent as the stones in the center pit heat up. To finish my day, I stop at the Unu Spa for an Andean hot-stone massage. The floor of the spa is lined with dried grass mats. When my therapist walks around, the soft crackling sounds transport me back to the forest.

LAN Flights: to Lima every day from Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Guayaquil, La Paz, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Quito and Santiago (Chile), and from Madrid three times a week. To Cusco every day from Lima.

Where to Stay

Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel: For the best nature experience, stay a few nights at this hotel in the town of Aguas Calientes.
www.inkaterra.com

Hotel Monasterio: Most visitors to Machu Picchu combine their trip with a stay in the colonial city of Cuzco. This hotel is a remodeled monastery built in 1595. Some rooms have oxygen pumped through the ventilation system to help guests with altitude sickness.

www.monasterio.orient-express.com

The Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge: Part of the Orient-Express chain, this hotel near the citadel of Machu Picchu offers 29 rooms, two suites and exquisite cuisine in the *Tampu Restaurant Bar*.
<http://machupicchu.orient-express.com>

Getting There

Hiram Bingham Train: Orient-Express runs luxury trains from Cuzco to Machu Picchu daily.
www.orient-express.com

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